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# Political Power Play in Thailand

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An Intelligence Assessment

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EA 83-10013  
January 1983

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]  
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directed to the Chief, Southeast Asia Division, OEA,  
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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 21 January 1983  
was used in this report.*

Thailand's Gen. Athit Kamlang-ek, promoted to Commander in Chief in September 1982 after a meteoric rise through the military ranks, has become one of the most powerful—and controversial—figures in Thailand. His recent demand for constitutional amendments to ensure the armed forces' dominance of the political process in Thailand has plunged the country into a constitutional crisis.

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The current situation in Thailand is highly fluid. Because our access to some of the key players is limited and because most of them probably have not decided on their own positions, it is impossible for us to predict the success or failure of Athit's attempts to amend the Constitution.

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If Athit is successful in forcing elected officials to agree to continued military dominance in Parliament, he will add to the already considerable power he wields in Thai politics. In that case, we would expect him to continue to maneuver himself toward the position of prime minister. Moreover, as long as he remains Commander in Chief, we would expect him to use the threat of military action to impose his views on other policymakers. If, however, Athit does not have the support of Prime Minister Prem and King Phumiphol in his current drive to amend the Constitution, he may be unable to press key political party leaders to accede to his demands, a situation that could well provoke Athit to mount a coup.

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## Political Power Play in Thailand

Thailand's constitutional crisis began on 11 January when General Athit, in an English-language Bangkok newspaper, called for a special session of the elected National Assembly to amend the Constitution to retain the current multiple constituency system of electing representatives and at the same time to protect existing powers of the appointed, military-dominated Senate.

Under the current Constitution, the powers of the Senate are to be reduced in April so that it will no longer provide a majority of votes in Parliament. Made up largely of senior military officers and representing highly conservative interests, the Senate has been able to limit the role of civilian politicians and resist reforms that could undermine the officers' extensive business and political interests.

The current Constitution also calls for a new political parties law to be implemented fully when national elections are held in June. Intended to put an end to opportunistic splinter groups and frequent party changing by politicians, the new law is forcing small interest groups to join major political factions. The most controversial provision of the law states that the party winning the majority of votes in a province takes all the National Assembly seats for that province. Not only does this provision favor large parties, it will also sharply curtail the ability of politicians to operate as independent agents.

many of the National Assembly members want to retain the current election procedures and are willing to compromise on retaining Senate powers to make a deal. Some senior officers fear, however, that Athit's continuing pressure on the politicians will intensify emotions to the point where a compromise is impossible. The officers also note that Athit is becoming frustrated at the slow response to his demands and speculate that he might mount a coup before the issue is debated in Parliament.



Gen. Athit Kamlang-ek, Commander in Chief

Liaison

The US Embassy believes that the major parties are willing to hold a special session of Parliament, although their leaders are trying to maintain some flexibility in public. Embassy officials note, however, that even if this occurs, there is no guarantee that Athit will be able to achieve the remainder of his objectives quickly, if at all.

### Key Players in the Constitutional Crisis

We believe Athit's success—in pushing through the amendment or mounting a coup—will depend on the support or acquiescence of the King, Prime Minister

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Prem, and the military. Athit has long had the firm support of the palace, and his quick rise to power in large part was a result of Prem's patronage. In the military, Athit has the backing of Army commanders in the critical Bangkok region, and leading provincial troop commanders—although they have no binding ties to Athit—at least appear to accept his recent elevation to Commander in Chief. [REDACTED]

Important staff positions are held by Athit's backers. In addition, two of his academy classmates serve as Assistant Commander in Chief and head of the Bangkok First Army Region. Athit heads the Internal Security Operations Command, which gives him direct control over any military or police unit in the country whenever he deems national security is threatened. [REDACTED]

Because our access to some of the key players is limited, however, and because most of them probably have not yet finalized their own positions, it is impossible for us to predict the success or failure of Athit's attempts to amend the Constitution. [REDACTED]

**The King.** Available information indicates that the King so far has decided not to involve the prestigious monarchy in the current political struggle. Nonetheless, we believe that because the military is a strong supporter of the monarchy, the King probably wants to protect the military's influence over the political process. Such protection, however, probably does not extend to backing a coup. From the King's perspective, a coup would damage Thailand's international prestige and set back genuine progress that has been achieved in the evolution of the Thai political structure. [REDACTED]

**Prime Minister Prem.** As Defense Minister and one of Thailand's most successful and professional soldiers, Prem enjoys considerable prestige throughout the armed forces, and many officers could be expected to follow his lead. His honesty and his concern with national interests over his own, moreover, have earned

him a wide measure of public support. Prem has consistently supported the scheduled constitutional changes. [REDACTED]

**Military Reaction.** The US defense attache reports uncharacteristically vehement feelings expressed by some senior officers against Athit. Athit's bypassing of ranking superiors to become CINC and his abrasive personality have rankled the General Staff. Although these officers stand to gain if Athit is successful in pushing through the constitutional amendment, they might try to capitalize on the current disarray in the government in an attempt to force Prem to remove Athit as CINC. [REDACTED]

Athit also has major enemies among the leaders of the abortive coup attempt in April 1981. Most observers believe their dismissal from military service received Athit's blessing and that he has adamantly opposed their reinstatement. Athit has kept them under close surveillance and occasional harassment. [REDACTED]

Public reaction is not likely to be a deciding factor in the outcome of the current crisis because there is no widespread demand for a faster pace in the democratization of the political process. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Thai press describes Athit as brash and arrogant, frequently

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calling him "Little Sarit," a reference to the aggressive military dictator who ruled Thailand during 1958-63. As a consequence, some student or special interest groups could see in the current crisis an opportunity to expand their influence. Protests, if they got out of hand, could polarize the views of the political parties and the military. [REDACTED]

#### Prospects

At this point, Athit still has some leverage. His resignation from the Senate last week, for example, led to the resignations of at least eight other senators holding powerful military commands. Others may follow as a gesture of Army support for Athit's position. He could also press senators attached to the armed forces to sign the motion calling for the session or press Prem and the King for their support. In addition, he could translate the Queen's strong backing into pressure both on other military officers she has supported in the past and on civilian politicians. [REDACTED]

If Athit is successful in persuading the elected officials, we would expect him to continue to back Prem while consolidating a base of support that eventually will allow him a smooth transition to the position of prime minister. Officers close to Athit believe that he would be reluctant to assume the prime-ministership now because his base of support at this point is probably too narrow to allow him to hold on to the position. If Athit creates a unified military while retaining the backing of the monarchy, his power will quickly eclipse that of Prem—even if it is exercised only behind the scenes. [REDACTED]

In the event that it becomes impossible to reach a compromise with the parliamentarians, Athit would appear to have only two choices—to back down or to mount a coup. Both actions pose considerable risks to Athit. If he backs down, Athit's leadership would come under strong criticism; his authority as CINC would be shaken, and his chances eventually to succeed to the prime-ministership would be reduced. [REDACTED]

A coup also risks derailing his political ambitions. Although we believe Athit has the military muscle to launch a coup, such an action might alienate the monarchy to a point where any government identified with Athit would not receive the sanction of the King. Without this legitimacy, the government would be plagued by disunity and lack of authority and could easily collapse. [REDACTED]

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**Annex A****Commander in Chief:  
Steppingstone to the  
Prime-Ministership**

The Commander in Chief heads Thailand's most influential government institution and is final arbiter of political power. He plays a pivotal role in supporting the regime—or promoting an alternative one—and is in an excellent position to become prime minister himself. Sarit Thanarat, Thailand's prototypical military strongman, for example, played strong supporting roles in several governments as Commander in Chief before he established his own military dictatorship in 1958. Prime Minister Prem served first as CINC and then concurrently as CINC and Prime Minister; in fact, six out of the 14 individuals who have commanded the Army since the 1932 coup ending absolute monarchy have parlayed a military power base into full control of the government.

The prime minister normally selects the CINC from among the most senior Army generals upon the legally required retirement of his predecessor at age 60. A CINC who has been a career line officer has troop commanders already beholden to him for their positions through the military patronage system, and the new job vastly increases his ability to appoint key subordinates. Patron-client ties become critical when the CINC calls upon supporters to carry out or put down a coup—Thailand's customary mechanism for political change. However, while the CINC is first among peers, other senior officers also have influential connections. If not co-opted by the CINC, they can form competing centers of power, create serious factionalism within the military, and attempt their own coups.



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**Annex B****General Athit:  
Fast Rise to the Top**

The son of a Thai Army lieutenant colonel, Athit joined the military in 1948 after graduating from Thailand's military academy. His first political action was in 1957 as the leader of a military force that successfully faced down a group demonstrating against military dictator Sarit. Described by one journalist as "forgotten for 20 years" thereafter—despite an active career as an infantry officer in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam—Athit again came to prominence in 1977 with increased concerns about the Communist insurgency. His anti-Communist sympathies and family ties to the monarchy brought him to the attention of his commanding officer, Gen. Prem Tinsulanon. Prem promoted Athit to major general and, after Prem's own elevation to Commander in Chief in 1979, placed Athit in charge of Bangkok's 1st Division—a pivotal unit in determining the fate of the government in coup attempts.

Athit suffered a setback in 1980 when Prem transferred him to the politically less important number-two position in the Korat Second Army Region, probably at the urging of the "Young Turk" military faction, which was competing aggressively with Athit for Prem's favor. When Prem later refused to go along with Young Turk plans in April 1981 to institute martial law on his behalf, Athit had his chance to get even.

Having failed to get Prem's cooperation, the Young Turks hastily organized a coup against the government. According to his own account to the press, Athit led the Prime Minister back to Bangkok from Korat where he had fled with the royal family. The Young Turks quickly collapsed, and Prem promoted Athit to lieutenant general and appointed him First Army Region commander, a position considered by all observers of Thai military politics to be essential to building a personal power base.

Athit became Assistant CINC in October 1981—the only Assistant CINC who did not have to relinquish his troop command—and was promoted to full general shortly thereafter. Rising at an unprecedented rate, Athit allegedly lacked sufficient time in grade even to acquire the appropriate insignia for his uniform. With both troops and a prestigious position, however, he became the Army's single most powerful officer and was promoted to CINC in September 1982.

Since that time, Athit has moved quickly to build a strong staff and expand his support base. His established role in the military decisionmaking process ensured that he had considerable influence in drawing up last year's annual promotion list even before becoming CINC. Important staff slots thus went to Athit's backers. Athit also made sound appointments to head budget and intelligence offices, according to the US defense attache, and has placed a good negotiator in the delicate job of Chief of Staff. Athit's vacated position as head of the Bangkok First Army Region was filled by a supportive academy classmate, Lt. Gen. Phat Urailoet.

[redacted] Athit has also  
breathed life into the Bangkok Peacekeeping Com-  
mand in order to make it a personal political base.  
Hitherto a paper organization without an assigned  
staff, Athit handpicked personnel for the Command,  
naming the Army's Director of Operations, Major  
General Chawalit, as Chief of Staff. The Command  
acts almost like Athit's private army. [redacted]

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